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The COMPARATIVE AUTHENTICITY *of* TACITUS *and* SUETONIUS, *illuſtrated by the Queſtion,* " *Whether* NERO " *was the* AUTHOR *of the* MEMORABLE CONFLA- " GRATION *at* ROME?" *By* ARTHUR BROWNE, *L. L. D. S. F. T. C. D. and M. R. I. A.*

Read June 8, 1793.

SO much has been ſaid of the candour of Suetonius, and of his work being the moſt accurate narration extant of the lives of the Emperors, that it is worth the pains to enquire how far theſe praiſes are due. Others are ſaid to have been actuated by hatred, or ſlaves to adulation; he is repreſented alone as fair and uninfluenced* For my own part I ſo much differ from this opinion, that I have ever conſidered the rank allotted to Suetonius, in the ſcale of hiſtorical merit, as elevated much beyond his deſerts. I am not inclined to truſt either his candour or his accuracy, particularly when oppoſed to, or compared

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* See the encomiums collected by Pitiſcus, in the preface to his edition of Suetonius.

with his rival hiſtorian. We are accuſtomed, I know not how, at an early age, from cotemporary ſtudies, to unite the names of cotemporary hiſtorians, and from thence perhaps inſenſibly to infer a ſimilarity of excellence. The authors peruſed treat of the ſame facts, they are read at the ſame time, and the mind is yet too young for accurate diſcrimination. May not ſuch aſſociations have had ſome effect with reſpect to Suetonius and Tacitus? But the exerciſe of maturer judgment readily ſeparates ſuch unions, and detects the apparent parallelism of objects, which, ſufficiently purſued, will be found in time infinitely to diverge. This judgment, however, is in many caſes never exerciſed at all.

A PREMATURE peruſal of the claſſics often prevents a ſubſequent cool reviſal of their beauties and their merits, impels the man to conſider the ſubjects of the ſtudies of the boy as trifling and diſguſting, and indolently to acquieſce in firſt impreſſions, rather than retrace ſteps which appeared unpleaſant becauſe involuntary. But he who at maturer years is led by taſte or inclination to examine and compare the lights of antiquity, will be aſtoniſhed at their numerous detections of his errors firſt imbibed, and corrections of the implicit faith which he has put in ſome of its oracles; and perhaps no where will he find leſs reaſon for confidence than in the ſecretary of Adrian (for ſuch was Suetonius), however high his poſt or good his means of information.

THE

THE title of this Eſſay indicates my intention to confine my obſervations to the comparative fidelity in narration of the celebrated writers therein mentioned, without touching on their other relative perfections or imperfections. The inſtance which I have ſelected to illuſtrate this point (for abundance of them might be found *) may to ſome appear trifling; and it may be aſked, who, in the eighteenth century, can be intereſted in the queſtion, whether Rome, in the firſt, was burnt by the hand of her natural protector, or of what utility is the diſcuſſion which tends to waſh away one ſpot from the bloody garb of Nero? The objection ſhould not come from the theoretic lover of truth, never deſpiſing enquiry and diſcrimination; nor will the expulſion of falſehood from hiſtory ever appear trifling to its practical admirers. The queſtion too is not totally unconnected with the well-known controverſy in morals, on the exiſtence of gratuitous malevolence, as any alleged motives for this ſuppoſed conduct of the tyrant are utterly unſatisfactory to the

* Such as Suetonius' aſſertion, that Tiberius aboliſhed the privilege of ſanctuary, when the contrary, which is aſſerted by Tacitus, is proved beyond a doubt, by coins ſubſequent to his reign; his making Germanicus conquer a king of Armenia, when Armenia had no king, and was not at war with Rome; his repreſentation of the character of Nero, in many reſpects differing from the traits given by Tacitus and others; his mentioning the loſs of an army in Aſia, when from Tacitus it appears it was only the rumour of ſuch a loſs. Surely theſe variances would not have appeared trifling to Lipſius, who took ſuch pains to reconcile theſe authors, when differing in the point, Whether Agrippa Poſthumus was killed by a *centurion* or a *tribune* of the ſoldiers. Joſephus obſerves, that no man's character has been more miſrepreſented, from adulation on the one ſide and prejudice on the other, than Nero's.

the rational mind*: But its chief importance reſts on the grounds I have premiſed. If we detect an hiſtorian in any one inſtance, in a peremptory and dogmatical aſſertion of a diſputed, nay improbable charge, have we not cauſe to view his writings with general ſuſpicion, and ſcrutinize with jealous eye his accuracy or his candour? And we cannot ſelect a better example than that of a direct and unqualified allegation of a plain and ſimple fact, into which, if falſe, the writer could not from any circumſtances be ſuppoſed to be innocently or unwittingly betrayed.

SUETONIUS, then, directly and circumſtancially aſcribes the conflagration at Rome in the time of Nero to that deteſted Emperor, while Tacitus only ſays, *forte an dolo Imperatoris incertum.* The authority of the former ſeems to have prevailed, and few traditions have been more ſtrongly believed, or ſayings more frequently applied, than " that Nero fiddled while Rome " was burning." I apprehend therefore that the following arguments to the contrary will have at leaſt the recommendation of novelty, as the oppoſite opinion has never been hinted by any writer whom I have met, except the Abbé Millot, who annexes no reaſons for his doubts.

THE

* The deſire of ſeeing the reſemblance of Troy in flames is too childiſh to be imputed even to the fantaſtical mind of Nero, and the deſign of burning a great city in order to improve and rebuild it, if indeed neceſſary, in the plenitude of his power, for ſuch object (while under our moderate government ſimilar improvement is without difficulty attained on valuing the houſes pulled down) does not ſeem to be confirmed by his ſubſequent actions.

THE reader, who recollects the idle calumnies, which, upon a ſimilar occaſion, were thrown out againſt a Prince of our own, Charles the Second, and the numberleſs inſinuations of oppoſite parties at that period, branding each other with the name of incendiaries, will not incautiouſly aſſent to the rumour bred by inflamed imaginations, aſcribing to malice the offſpring of accident.

WHOEVER has implicitly believed that Rome was burnt by Nero, will find, to his ſurpriſe, on the firſt peep into Tacitus, this paſſage, *Hoc tempore, Nero Antii agens*, the paragraph which firſt indeed, by exciting my wonder, drew my attention to this ſubject. The man, who is depicted as ſitting on a lofty tower of his palace, attuning to the harp the poet's numbers on the deſtruction of Troy, in the midſt of the imperial city, with whoſe fires his eyes were feaſted, was not, at their commencement at leaſt, in Rome at all. This ſhould ſeem almoſt to terminate the queſtion: but, no! the critic will ſay, Antium was only ten miles from Rome, and the Emperor had ample time to arrive there long before the extinction of the flames; in fact he did ſo, when he found that the moſt vigorous orders which he had iſſued from Antium had no effect. Such orders he had iſſued, and it ſhews his alacrity in trying to have the fire extinguiſhed before his arrival. Let us ſee then how he acted after his arrival. During the very confuſion and terror of the conflagration it may have been difficult to aſcertain the conduct of the Prince; and it is during that period that Suetonius charges him with

with encouraging the flames and cheriſhing the incendiaries. " Voices of men," ſays he, " were heard, exclaiming that they " acted by orders from the Emperor, and emiſſaries from his very " houſehold might have been apprehended in the act of ſpreading " the flames." That the Emperor ſhould have been abſurd enough to furniſh incendiaries with the authority of his name is incredible; but let us remember that within three years paſt the deſtroyers of the caſtles of the nobility in France pleaded authority from that King whoſe throne they were on the point of overturning. To theſe idle tales I oppoſe the acknowledged behaviour of Nero, after the extinction of the fire, when it ſtands unveiled by that cloud of confuſion and rumour which always attends preſent calamity. He opened his gardens for the ſufferers, he pitched tents for them, he laboured to provide them with neceſſaries, he cheapened the price of corn; ſuch are the teſtimonies of Tacitus. On his previous abſence, on his ſubſequent conduct, I might perhaps then reſt his innocence; but it is confirmed by ſome other ſtrong arguments, to which I now proceed.

THE Emperor is charged with ſetting fire to the city, that he might enjoy the beauty of the ſight. It appears from Tacitus, that ſo far from coveting the ſpectacle, his fault was, indolent reluctance to move from Antium. He iſſued from thence the moſt vigorous orders for extinguiſhing the flames, but he refuſed to ſtir till his own palace was on fire. It was in this ſituation that he muſt be ſuppoſed to have run up with his harp, immediately on his arrival, to the top of the tower of Mæcenas; a ſtation where he ſtood a very reaſonable chance of being broiled for

for his pains. The ſuppoſition is too ludicrous to admit a doubt of its falſehood; and this being as confidently aſſerted as any circumſtance, muſt make us doubt of the truth of all the reſt. Let us combine, then, the abſence of the Emperor from the capital when the fire began, his active orders before he left Antium, his unwillingneſs to leave it, the ſituation of the city on his arrival, and his behaviour after the conflagration, and ſee where we can find the leaſt probable trace of the tale of Suetonius.

THE ſpot where the fire broke out affords another very ſtrong argument of want of deſign; *In prædiis Tigellini Æmilianis proruperat*, ſays Tacitus. He obſerves, indeed, that *plus infamiæ incendium habuit*, for that reaſon, that is, becauſe it was on the eſtate of Tigellinus; but where were theſe Prædia? in the diſtrict called the Æmiliana. Now this diſtrict was quite without the city, as any one will find upon conſulting the plan of ancient Rome. *Eorum ædificia qui habitant extra Portam Frumentariam, aut in Æmilianis*, ſays Varro, lib. iii. *De re Ruſtica.* What could have induced the Emperor, whoſe abilities do not ſeem to have been contemptible, to have adopted ſuch an extraordinary method of firing the city, by kindling the flame in its remoteſt ſuburbs? "He was accuſed," ſays Tacitus, "of having been "actuated with a deſire of founding a new city, and calling it by "his name." Did he do ſo? And what prevented him? The conſequence did not follow, and the imputed means were abſurdly diſproportionate to the motive.

THAT the fire in the Æmiliana was accidental will become more than probable, when we find that it was a quarter where dangerous and entenſive conflagrations had happened before. It appears from Suetonius, in his account of the reign of Claudius, chap. 18. that one had obſtinately raged in this region during the life of that Prince: *Ubi Æmiliana pertinacius arderent.* And it appears that it was of conſequence enough to call for the preſence and inceſſant labour of the Emperor himſelf and his whole court: We may reaſonably conjecture, therefore, that it was a part of the ſuburbs, for ſome reaſon or other, perhaps by being the ſite of hazardous manufactures, particularly expoſed and obnoxious to theſe calamities.

IT is true that Tacitus, in another place, ſays, with a ſeeming contradiction, *Initium in ea parte Circi ortum, quæ Palatino Cælioque Montibus contigua eſt*; and Fleury, in his Eccleſiaſtical Hiſtory, founding the aſſertion on this paſſage, ſays it broke out in ſome ſhops about the Circus, without taking notice of the other alleged ſite of its commencement.

THE commentators on Tacitus have endeavoured to reconcile the difference, and inſiſt that it broke out in two places, the Circus and the Æmiliana. Now, as to the Circus, Tacitus himſelf accounts for its riſe and progreſs there, *Ubi per tabernas, quibus id Mercimonium inerat quo flamma alitur cæptus ignis.* The fire began in certain ſhops filled with inflammable materials, and naturally calculated to originate and diffuſe the flames. Where they could ſo eaſily be accounted for, who would have ſeen, reflected by their light,

light, the deadly viſage of the tyrant, but thoſe whoſe horrors of his crimes and terror of his wickedneſs raiſed on every occaſion the imperial phantom before their alarmed imaginations. Let us not fear that by deducting this little burthen of guilt we ſhall leave too ſmall a portion of infamy to ſatiate reſentment and deter imitation. The bloody roll of Nero's crimes will ſcarcely appear diminiſhed by expunging this inferior title to abhorrence.

It is an inferior circumſtance, yet not entirely unworthy of note, that the rumours which had reached the ears of the two hiſtorians, as to Nero's conduct, eſſentially varied. To the one he had been repreſented as going openly and publicly to the ſummit of Mæcenas's tower to ſing the fate of Troy, while to the other he was depicted as retiring into his private apartments *(in domeſticam ſcenam)*, there ſecretly to enjoy the devaſtation of his groaning country. Uncertainty and contradiction are the ſiſters of unfounded report.

From the account given us of this event by Tacitus, we find that the Emperor's object, in at length leaving Antium to go to Rome, was to ſave his palace. Now in this he did not ſucceed. The palace was deſtroyed, and yet he is afterwards accuſed of conſtructing a new palace of wonderful magnificence, out of the ruins of his country *(Uſus eſt patriæ ruinis*, ſays Tacitus), not without inſinuation that ſuch might have been partly the object of the antecedent devaſtation. There is nothing in his previous conduct to ſupport the ſuſpicion, for he was anxious to ſave his former reſidence, and to prevent the neceſſity of erecting a new one.

THE anxiety of Nero to avoid the charge is utterly incompatible with the narration of Suetonius. *Incendit urbem tam palam*, ſays that hiſtorian, *Ut plerique Conſulares, Cubicularios ejus, cum ſtupa tædaque, in prædiis ſuis deprehenſos non attigerint.* Is it credible that he, who ſo much dreaded the imputation, ſhould have committed the fact without diſguiſe. That he uſed every exertion to avert the charge appears from Tacitus—by anxious and active care to expedite the rebuilding of the city—by princely largeſſes to the ſufferers—by ſupplications and atoning ſacrifices to the gods, he laboured to extricate himſelf from the infamy. It is true he was not ſucceſsful. Such was the odium againſt him. *Non ope humana, non largitionibus principis, aut deûm placamentis decedebat infamia.* He then endeavoured to throw the ſuſpicion on the Chriſtians, ſince he found the world too prejudiced to aſcribe the event to accident—with equal want of ſucceſs indeed. But all which I wiſh to infer is, that this extreme anxiety confutes the notion of his raſh unguarded promotion of the calamity; and that he was particularly diſtreſſed at this rumour appears from his known character, which was, in general, to deſpiſe all rumours, *Nihil patientius quam maledicta et convitia hominum tulit.*—Suetonius, p. 258.

THE extent of the power of prejudice againſt this miſerable Prince at this period cannot be more ſtrongly exemplified than in the murmurs which Tacitus mentions, occaſioned by his opening the city and widening the ſtreets, becauſe, as was alleged, the old narrow ſtreets and lofty houſes contributed exceedingly

to

to the ſalubrity of Rome, by protecting the paſſenger from the heat of the ſun. I will even draw an argument from the virulence of Suetonius. "He would not ſuffer," ſays that writer, "the bodies of the dead, who periſhed in the fire, to be burnt "by their friends, nor the ruins of the edifices to be removed by "the owners, but took the charge upon himſelf, for the ſake of "plunder." Whether thoſe who were burnt already required to be burnt again I know not; but does not the ill-nature of the remark proclaim the inclination of the author? Is it not more natural to ſuppoſe, that the fear of peſtilence, from the expoſition of bodies left to the random care of individuals, in a time of general diſtraction, required the interpoſition of government and the adoption of public regulations, to prevent the poſſibility of private negligence? And was it not right in the governing power of the ſtate to refuſe to truſt to the weakneſs or indolence of the ſubject, the office of removing rubbiſh and ruins, whoſe immenſe heaps forbad improvement and poſtponed renovation?

The truth is, when Suetonius wrote, invective againſt the race of Cæſar opened the way to honour and preferment. Abuſe of the Auguſtan family was the faſhion of ſucceeding times, and the inſtrument of flattery with ſucceeding Emperors. With infinite caution, therefore, are we to admit the adulatory invective of the writers of the age of Trajan. The fidelity of hiſtory was made to bow to the etiquette of courts and the intereſts of hiſtorians.

This propenſity to blacken the Cæſars, received, in the particular inſtance of Nero, additional height in later times from the enmity of the Chriſtians. His cruel perſecution of Chriſtianity, and his inordinate wickedneſs, in averting upon its votaries the calumny thrown upon himſelf, with the ſignal martyrdoms of St. Peter and St. Paul, under his dominion, have ſtamped him with the moſt ſanguinary dye in the annals of religion. It was natural to ſurmiſe that the man who ſo unjuſtly accuſed others, had not been unjuſtly accuſed himſelf. His innocence was ſuppoſed to include their crimination; and as the empire became Chriſtian, it became in a manner impious to doubt his guilt.

On whom does the authority of this legend reſt? As appears to me, on the authority of Suetonius alone. The careful peruſer of Tacitus will, I think, agree with me, that he did not believe the tale; he wrote before Suetonius, and poſſeſſed earlier and better channels of enquiry. Suetonius was ſecretary to Adrian, whoſe reign was preceded by the death of Tacitus*. The next author who mentions the charge with confidence is Dio. Caſſius, who lived in the reign of Alexander Severus, two hundred years after the event; no teſtimony can go beyond its firſt original; the tribe of ſervile copyers add not a jot of weight to the evidence.

Aurelius Victor, Eutropius, Marcus Aurelius Caſſiodorus and Jornandes, the only ſubſequent Latin writers who repeat the clamour,

* As is generally ſuppoſed.

clamour, merely echo the aſſertions of Suetonius and Dio. They could not be much better judges of the matter than we at this day, had they even taken the trouble to weigh the evidence. Aurelius Victor and Eutropius lived at a period three hundred years diſtant from the time of the conflagration, in the reigns of Julian and Valentinian; Caſſiodorus was conſul under Theodoric, and born in 476; and Jornandes, in Juſtinian's age, was ſecretary to a king of the Goths. As to the principal modern writers who aſſert and inſiſt on the fact, and particularly the eccleſiaſtical hiſtorians, Xiphilinus, Vitranius and Sulpicius, though they lived earlier than Fleury, who in the preſent century ſupports their opinion, their aſſertions can have no more weight than his, nor their knowledge of the facts be greater than ours. Xiphilinus was the profeſſed abridger of Dio. Caſſius. Dio. repeated from Suetonius, and upon the foundation of Suetonius's authority the whole fabric muſt ultimately depend. If any thing has been added, it has probably been the work of exuberant imagination, like that of Karholtus of Hamburgh, a modern eccleſiaſtical writer, who repreſents the Emperor at a banquet ſending forth troops of incendiaries, and ſitting to hear at intervals the triumphant tale of their horrid exploits, a picture of which he could not have found the leaſt trait in any ancient hiſtorian. It remains only to obſerve, that Suetonius, the father of this tale, could not have been unwittingly deceived into this aſſertion.

Thus have I endeavoured to ſcrutinize, in this inſtance, the accuracy and authenticity of Suetonius, which may be a clue to his general character as a writer, the only object perhaps which could

could have juſtified my calling the attention of this revered aſſembly to a queſtion ſo remote, and ſeemingly ſo unintereſting. Always, as I have ſaid, has that hiſtorian appeared to me to be over-rated; the indecency of his deſcriptions has been often condemned, and it was well obſerved, that Suetonius wrote the lives of the Emperors with the ſame licentiouſneſs with which they lived. Were I to compare Suetonius with any writer of our own time, in point of credit due to his narration, I would ſcarcely aſſign him a place ſuperior to Smollet's; I mean not with reſpect to compoſition, but as to authenticity and materials. Both of them ſeem to have compiled from the *actus diurni*, or newſpapers of the day, and to merit equal authority with thoſe crude and haſty chronicles. If the one has lived for eighteen centuries, while the other poſſibly may not for one, it has perhaps been owing to the charms of his compoſition, not to the dignity of his hiſtory.

If theſe remarks ſhall in any degree tend to aſcertain the rank of this famed hiſtorian in the ſcale of hiſtory, or rather by calling the attention of more accurate obſervers to the general complection of his works, to induce them to aſcertain it, they will have an importance which at this remote time they could not borrow from the ſubject itſelf. They may perhaps alſo derive ſome additional claim to attention, from the circumſtance of a celebrated attack having been lately made by Mr. Whitaker of Mancheſter, on the authenticity of his rival hiſtorian, in a Compariſon between Tacitus and Gibbon.